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"A Spectacle of Blood": The Art of Suffering in Andrew Marvell's "The Unfortunate Lover"

"'The Unfortunate Lover' is probably the worst love-poem ever written by a man of genius," wrote H. C. Beeching in the *National Review* in 1901. Despite his generally favourable opinion on Marvell's lyrics, the critic distinguishes a group of poems which he finds "the least satisfactory" on account of the "little passion" they demonstrate. According to Beeching a good love-poem (and he gives "To His Coy Mistress" as an outstanding example) is "the spontaneous expression of feeling," preferably the poet's "individual feeling," while "passion is allowed to take its natural path" (in Donno 1978: 292). These expectations about the aim and character of love lyrics seem to rehearse a similar conviction expressed earlier by John Dryden about John Donne, who according to the younger poet "affects the Metaphysicks, not only in his Satires, but in his Amorous Verses, where Nature only shou'd reign; and perplexes the Minds of the Fair Sex with nice Speculations of Philosophy, when he shou'd ingage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of Love" (in Smith 1975: 151). While Beeching is looking for genuine passions recreated in a confessional love poem, Dryden would probably be more interested in the way this passion is recreated or created in poetry – genuine or not, love, and not metaphysics, should be the main theme of a love poem.

But is "The Unfortunate Lover" a love poem at all? Generic expectations raised by the title, and to some extent by the first stanza, are not fulfilled. "The absence of courtship" and "the distancing from passion," as Nigel Smith (2003: 88) notices, make critics turn their interpretative effort towards allegorical reading, be it philosophical, religious or political allegory. Thus, the figure of the suffering lover becomes an allegory of the soul which falls from the eternal bliss into a prison of the mortal body and the finite world ruled by time and "quarrelling elements." The unfortunate lover is also interpreted as a symbol of Christ, whose dual divine-human nature and ultimate sacrifice the poem seems to represent allegorically. Last but not least, the lover's story can be an unconventional and obscure (for obvious political reasons) elegy on the death of Charles I, the king-martyr. None of these readings fully solves all the

puzzles presented by the poem, and, as Nigel Smith (2003: 88) rightly observes, this enigmatic lyric "has the ability to ruin the effectiveness of any interpretation, however subtle, which attempts to render it clear." Without aspiring to this interpretative ideal, I would like to concentrate in my paper on the theme of suffering, which is crucial to all the above-mentioned readings, and, definitely, the most manifest emotion constructed in the poem. Even if at first we find it difficult to penetrate into the intricate network of the poem's symbolism, the strongest sensation evoked in the reader is that of the lover's agony. I will try to demonstrate that the way this prolonged torment is rendered in the succession of seemingly conventional images turns suffering into a form of art. This, in turn, invites meta-poetic speculations that can be made on the margins of the more comprehensive allegorical readings of "The Unfortunate Lover."

In another poem by Marvell, "The Gallery" (one of those "least satisfactory" according to Beeching) lovers' passions and hardships are turned into various types of portraits each representing a different pictorial style or genre. Similarly, "The Unfortunate Lover" transforms passions into form, or rather forms, of art, offering a greater variety of pictorial or literary conventions that fictionalise and mythologise the lover's suffering. We can recognise references to two closely related visual symbolic arts – emblems and heraldic devices, both contributory to the Renaissance courtly re-enactments of chivalric tournaments – a type of spectacle which is also present in the poem; while all these forms provide iconographic and dramatic material for the most spectacular pageant of the Stuart times – a courtly masque, to which the poem's great "spectacle of Blood" can be compared.

The premature (enforced by medicinal art of Caesarean section), violent shipwreck-birth of the lover becomes a royal-like occasion to be celebrated with a breathtaking spectacle, in which "Nature to his Birth presents / This masque of quarrelling elements" (ll. 25–26).[1] Like the disguised ladies in Samuel Daniel's *Vision of the Twelve Goddesses*, who dance and leave an offering in the Temple of Peace, Marvell's imaginary masquers offer their gifts to the new-born "unfortunate and abject Heir" (l. 30), though these donators are everything but peace-loving:

> The Sea him lent these bitter Tears
> Which at his Eyes he alwais bears:
> And from the Winds the Sighs he bore,
> Which through his surging Breast do roar. (ll. 17–20)

[1] All quotations from Marvell's poem come from George de F. Lord's (1984) edition.

Like Stuart courtiers, the lover, in whose honour this cruel spectacle is held, becomes himself its main actor. But instead of enjoying the harmony and splendour of the main masque, he is thrown, as if by mistake (since this was the realm of professional actors rather then noble masquers [cf. Orgel 1969: 5]), into a topsy-turvy uncontrollable world of the anti-masque (or antic-masque). Surprisingly, in this spectacle the raging elements are not miraculously dispersed by a sudden turn of stage machinery, and the poor lover is entrapped in the succeeding scenes of fighting contraries and unresolved paradoxes.

The scene of raging elements is replaced now by an emblematic pair of voracious black cormorants, cruel guardians who keep the lover alive only to torture him:[2]

> They fed him up with Hopes and Air,
> Which soon digested to Despair.
> And as one Corm'rant fed him, still
> Another on his Heart did bill.
> Thus while they famish him, and feast
> He both consumed, and increast
> And languished with doubtful Breath,
> Th' *Amphibium* of Life and Death. (ll. 33–40)

As in the Stuart masque, where the idealised world is fundamentally a Neoplatonic vision, so in this extraordinary image a reader-spectator is referred through verbal allusions to Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, a Christian-Neoplatonic-hermetic-esoteric spiritual credo of an English Neoplatonist. In the first part of his book, having exulted at the perfection of Angels, Browne compares their existence with that of man, reflecting upon our "in-between" status in God's creation.

> These [Angels] are certainly the Magisterial and master pieces of the Creator, [...] the best part of nothing, actually existing, what we are but in *hopes* and probabilitie, we are only that *amphibious* piece betweene corporall and spirituall essence, that middle form that linkes those two together, and makes good the method of God and nature, that jumps not from extreames, but unites the incompatible distances by some middle and participating natures; that wee are the *breath* and similitude

[2] Marvell's cormorants seem to be a peculiar transformation of the Pelican symbolism (especially as the two species of birds belong to the same family). Like the Pelican they feed, and like the Pelican they peck, but not at their own but at the human breast. While the Pelican symbolises Christ's sacrifice that gives life to man, the Cormorants give and at the same time take, feed and famish; they are a paradox pointing to the "amphibious" state of a human being.

> of God, it is indisputable, and upon record of holy Scripture, [. . .] thus is man that great and true *Amphibium*, whose nature is disposed to live not onely like other creatures in divers elements, but in divided and distinguished worlds.
>
> (Browne 1977: 103, italics mine)

While Thomas Browne never despairs about the amphibious condition of man, but rather admires his intermediary-comprehensive-unifying role and stands in awe of God's "method," Marvell, by contrast, concentrates on the strife and suffering brought about by this dualism. His "poor lover" is not a link in the Great Chain of Being, but is tossed between the extremes, Hope and Despair, Life and Death; and due to the rhyming scheme of this stanza the emphasis falls always on the second word of the pair.[3] Thus, even though a Neoplatonic concept of man is implied through an intertextual allusion, the ideal world of the masque proper does not yet appear *deus-ex-machina*-like to interrupt miraculously the cruel "spectacle of Blood." The opposites are not "married" to form a perfect union, as in Jonson's masque *Hymenaei*, and the lover is now summoned to face Fortune in a chivalric tournament witnessed by "angry Heaven:"

> And now, when angry Heaven wou'd
> Behold a spectacle of Blood,
> Fortune and He are call'd to play
> At sharp before it all the day:
> And Tyrant Love his breast does ply
> With all his wing'd Artillery. (ll. 41–46)

Like Elizabethan courtiers at Accession Day Tilts (cf. Bates 1992: 45–89) or Stuart aristocrats in Jonson's allegorical pageants of *Prince Henry's Barriers* or *A Challenge at Tilt*, the unfortunate lover is made to enact his chivalric romance. However, his combat, though clearly allegorical, seems at the same time disturbingly real, as the opponents "play at sharp," i.e. fight with sharpened

[3] Verbal correspondences between this passage from Browne's book and stanza V of Marvell's poem are particularly interesting, especially as they do not seem to me accidental. First, the words emphasised, *hopes*, *breath* and *Amphibium* appear in the same order in Browne and in Marvell. Moreover, while such common nouns as *hope* and *breath* might have been used by Marvell without any intention to link them with Browne, the poet's borrowing of the Amphibium simile unmistakably points at *Religio Medici*. Thus, it seems possible to assume that stanza V becomes a pessimistic counterpart of the passage from Browne; hopes digest/transform into despair while God's breath of life is "doubtful" or feeble in man, placing him closer to the influence of death than life. This does not have to be Marvell's vision of human condition in general, but an image referring to the unfortunate lover's state at this particular stage of the poem's development.

weapons, to the death. Nor does Hymen come, as in Jonsonian fictional barriers, to reconcile the contestants. Apparently, the lover becomes heroically engaged in a losing battle. Nevertheless, it is this heroic attempt to subdue the raging elements, and not the masque's mechanical magic, that turn the "spectacle of Blood" into an ideal.

"Cuffing the thunder with one hand," with the other grappling "with the stubborn Rock," "Torn into Flames, and ragg'd with Wounds" in this unfair struggle, the lover finally consciously turns suffering into art. Like courtiers fashioning their own symbolic devices in Renaissance tournaments, the lover chooses his own blood to be both his stage-costume and his *impresa*; "a Lover drest / In his own Blood does relish best," he says. Although, after his precipitous and untimely fall in time, he, like a fallen meteor, cannot climb back, yet his heroic stance raises him to the title of banneret whose heraldic device, "in a field *Sable* a Lover *Gules*," symbolises the bloody victory over black despair and death. Woefully unable to return to the ideal world he fell from, he yet transcends the hostile world of raging elements – dying he metamorphoses into a literary ideal of a chivalric romance ("And he in Story only rules").

These references to masque, tournament, emblems and heraldry that can be traced in "The Unfortunate Lover" may work as an interpretative key to break the poem's "secret" codes; a "key" that operates at different levels of the poem's structure of meaning.[4]

Firstly, on the generic level, the presence of those closely related visual-dramatic-literary forms clearly suggests possible hidden meanings that go beyond the conventions and themes of a love lyric, on account that all these arts were highly symbolic and associated with the Renaissance interest in hieroglyphics. As Vaughan Hart (1994: 61) explains, "Jonson made frequent reference to editions of Ripa's *Iconologia* and Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* when composing the poetics of masque, thus requiring the audience to decipher what he once referred to as 'removed mysteries.'" Hence Marvell's references to masque or heraldry may be treated as the poet's suggestion that also in his poem we should look for "removed mysteries" – allegorical, hermetic or political.

These generic interpretative allusions are inseparable from the potential meaning behind the symbolic veil. If from the methods of interpretation typically applied to masques, emblems or heraldic devices we now turn to the cultural context within which these arts functioned, we may determine which

[4] This metaphorical reference to cryptography is not necessarily accidental or an expression of the author's *licentia poetica*, especially if we consider the troubled times when the poem was written. To some extent this poem can be treated as a "coded" royalist message.

of the allegorical readings of the poem seem most plausible. The predominantly royal character of masques and chivalric tilts (with their use of heraldic devices and emblems) seems to corroborate Charles I's, the king-martyr's substitution for the enigmatic figure of the unfortunate lover. When on 30 January 1649 the Banqueting House, which witnessed so many royal spectacles, becomes the setting for Charles's execution, the king's death becomes a masque-like, though bloody, spectacle; ironically, for ever turning the king into an icon of his royal masques. Similarly, the reality of the turbulent times of the Interregnum is transformed by Marvell into a boisterous world of anti-masque, while the opposite factions become the "quarrelling elements." Thus, the suffering lover who "betwixt the Flames and Waves, / Like Ajax the mad Tempest braves" is the king who heroically fights with his enemies, and with equal heroism meets his death at the scaffold. The magical-miraculous ability to break the anti-masque's evil spell and restore peace and order that the king or queen used to display in a courtly masque,[5] does not seem to have power against the Civil War reality. However, the miracle that Charles's suffering performs is to turn the king into a saint-like figure, making him "rule" if not in his country, at least in the realm of stories and legends. The royal masque's myth-making function finds a surprising epilogue on the scaffold and in Marvell's poem.

While the royal context of the discussed spectacles supports the political allegory behind the poem's enigmatic imagery, the idealism and magical elements of the Stuart masque should refer the readers of "The Unfortunate Lover" to the Neoplatonic concept of the human soul. Though pitilessly removed from its native spiritual element, the soul always tries to ascend to the higher world of Ideas, while the proportions of the human body reflect this higher harmony of the macrocosm. These correspondences and aspirations are present in the symbolic texture of Stuart masques; one may take as an example Jonson's *Hymenaei*, where the union of two people in marriage corresponds to the union and peace between two competing factions within the body politic, and these two earthly types of union reflect the union of the elements and cosmic harmony. Similarly, the unfortunate lover's heroic effort to impose order upon fighting elements may represent such a wish to restore harmony and an attempt to climb to "this region" to which he belongs. However, the masque created in the poem is mostly a chaotic anti-masque, and if any type of tran-

[5] See Jonson's *Hymenaei*, in which James I is called the "Priest of Peace" and Campion's *Somerset Masque*, in which Queen Anne's "Sacred Hand" was required to destroy the power of enchantment and release the captive knights.

scendence is achieved as a result of the lover's suffering and heroic death, it would be transcendence into art.

This conclusion leads to another set of interpretative suggestions afforded to the reader by references to various forms of Renaissance art, and to the masque in particular. The high degree of conventionality characterising the images of suffering turns the reader's attention (probably with some grimace of displeasure) to the convention itself, while frequent verbal allusions to visual, dramatic or literary genres make art and fiction come in focus not only as metaphors or sources of the poem's imagery but also as one of the important themes. What seemed to be simply a vehicle in some metaphors, transforms into the tenor of the whole poem. Thus "The Unfortunate Lover" becomes, on the one hand, a poem about the role of Art in the world where Nature rules, and, on the other hand, a self-referential text commenting on its fictional character and on its ordering power over the uncontrollable matter.

The opposition of Art to Nature is an all-pervasive Renaissance topos and a recurring motif in Marvell's poetry, where it is put to test in the context of various genres, arts or traditions – such as pastoral art and poetry, garden engineering, meditation, language philosophy or the question of social and political retirement. Also in this poem Art is juxtaposed with Nature, but a new viewpoint on this opposition is presented by the poem's reference to the Stuart masque. Studying the relationship between hermetic tradition and art at the court of the Stuart kings, Vaughan Hart (1994: 12) observes that

> The magician, and alchemist in particular, was held in occult philosophy to possess the power to connect earthly things with their archetypal forms, within the realm of Ideas[6] [. . .]. As an aspect of this, for the Platonist the artist's creation of architecture, painting, and music represented a parallel attempt to transform the lower, earthly world into this higher, angelic world of Platonic perfection. Magic itself laid claim to be the highest of all arts and as such a symbol of human creativity.

At the Stuart court, Ben Jonson, the poet whose allegorical vision opens into the world of Ideas, Inigo Jones, a stage-magician, and the monarch, presiding as a "Priest of Peace" over the spectacle, create an art-form which becomes a "religious ritual blessing the Court" (Hart 1994: 17).[7] In the masque Art has

[6] Reading the poem as a symbolic representation of a violent alchemical process seems to be yet another plausible interpretative option; in this context the image of suffering gains a new alchemical significance.

[7] This king / magus / artist "trio" makes us immediately think about Shakespeare's Prospero – a ruler, a magus, and an artist, staging his masque for Ferdinand and Miranda. This association is

magical power over the forces of Nature, harnessing and transforming them into a higher reality.

The unfortunate lover's struggle with Nature is also symbolically transformed into Art. Like a hermetic magus or a Neoplatonic poet, the lover becomes the mediator between the lower and the higher world, with his one hand on the "stubborn rock" and the other turned to heaven. However, in this image, the mediation and the following transformation is fulfilled through strife and suffering. As in the Promethean myth (and the figure of Prometheus is definitely implied in the poem in stanzas V and VII), the gift of Art that subdues rough and hostile Nature is dearly bought; it seems, however, that in Marvell's poem the final act of heroism is brought about by earlier suffering, reversing the story of the wretched Titan (it is Prometheus's heroic act that led to prolonged torment). Be that as it may, unlike the Stuart masque, Marvell presents miraculous transformation of chaos into Art as a painful process requiring sacrifices. The lover dies in the moment of his heroic act of self-creation, "yet dying leaves a Perfume here / And Music within every Ear."

Last but not least, "The Unfortunate Lover" is not only a poem about Art as a philosophical or aesthetic concept; it is a poem that through all its literary, dramatic or pictorial allusions becomes a self-referential poem, turning the reader's attention to its artificial and fictional character as a product of poetic creation. In the last stanza the lover is turned into an emblem of his own heroic suffering, becoming at the same time a hero in a story. The poem itself tells such a story. The lover's fall in time corresponds with his fall into the time of a narrative, as the universal present of the first stanza changes into past tense of a story which starts with the violent birth and ends with the heroic death of the main protagonist. Thus, the poem both describes the lover's metamorphosis into the hero of a story and becomes this story. Similarly, the Art of the poem's form orders the Natural forces of its content. Surprisingly, the poem about violence, turmoil and hostility of the world of matter displays a very regular form. Maren-Sofie Røstvig, examining assumed structural and thematic correspondence between Marvell's "The Unfortunate Lover" and Giordano Bruno's *De gli heroici furori* (*Heroic Frenzies*), noticed a similar circular structure in both works. According to her, the regularity of Marvell's poem is revealed "in the form of key concepts strategically placed so as to create a perfectly balanced symmetrical sequence ABCDEFFEDCBA" (Røstvig 1977: 249). The concepts

not surprising if we agree that both Shakespeare's *Tempest* and Marvell's "The Unfortunate Lover" are informed by the same Neoplatonic/hermetic concepts.

behind these letters are key words, the placement of which really creates something resembling a textual mirror reflection, or a number of spheres revolving around the central stanzas IV and V. Thus A stands for *Love* in the first stanza, B and C for *Wave* and *Rock* in the second D and E for *Breast* and *Day* in the third, followed by the repetition of the word *Cormorant(s)* as the centre of this little universe of the poem, on the other side of which, as if reflected in a mirror, appear *day*, *brest*, *Rock*, *Wave*, *Love* (in stanzas VI, VII and VIII). One may doubt whether these are really the key words-concepts in the poem, or whether the particular structure was borrowed from Bruno, but this conceptual as well as rhythmical regularity of the poem is evident. The ordering power of Art manifests itself in the poem's regular structure and in its highly hyperbolic and conventional images. It may seem at first that throughout the poem we are watching an uncontrollable anti-masque of elements which cannot be miraculously interrupted. However, this spectacle of raging Nature is from the very beginning controlled by the regular form of the poem, just as the Stuart anti-masque is always a spectacle of madness controlled.

Marvell's poem figuratively refers to a spectacle which openly emphasises its artificial character, a dramatic genre in which it is Art that reigns and not Nature (against Dryden's expectations). But in Marvell's poetry Nature is always a domain of chance and passions that should be controlled and subdued by the ordering power of Art.[8] In the masque harmony and balance are achieved both through the art of magic and through the magic of Art. Referring to this myth-making ritualistic spectacle, not only does Marvell offer a number of interpretative keys or praises of Art over Nature, but he also gives Art the power to transcend the world of Nature.

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[8] See, for example, Marvell's presentation of the chancy Meadow as opposed to the orderly though "military" Garden, in his country house poem "Upon Appleton House."

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